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ABSTRACT

Research was conducted to explore questions relating to the nature of spelling word lists. Word lists from 248 spelling books from 32 publishers' series, grades one through eight, were analyzed. Of the spellers, 17 series were published between 1930 and 1940 and 15 are published currently. A total of 8,645 words from the 1940 era programs and 10,853 words in the current series were recorded. Findings indicated a drift away from words selected on the basis of spelling regularity or irregularity and toward selection on the basis of reading curricula. There were 111 words that appeared in 15 or more series in both the 1940 and current lists. Only 33% of the words used to teach spelling rules in current programs were selected by five or more authors, while 55% of the 1940 words were selected by five or more authors, indicating that at the earlier period of time words were selected from a common source. (MKM)

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Learning to Spell from Word Lists

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After 50 years of an extraordinary amount of research there is little doubt that textbook writers and practitioners alike still believe that learning to spell occurs as a result of the pupil's daily encounter with a prescribed word lists from a graded textbook. The results of research on the nature of spelling and the process of learning to spell from 1930 to 1980 yielded several clear and practical recommendations for the classroom practitioner. For example, research on spelling instruction has reported that children do not appear to benefit from more than 75 minutes of instruction per week and evidence supports even the reduction of this amount.(20) Other evidence showed that not all children need formal instruction in spelling although their competence should be regularly tested.(4) Research also showed that the test-teach method is recommended as the most effective approach to the teaching of spelling,(7,26) Additional studies showed that children appear to learn to spell words best incidentally when their attention is centered on a related task, such as writing a story, and not on the improvement of spelling itself.(13,14,18) Furthermore, poor spellers fare better when taught from teacher-prepared lists than from other word sources.(5) Lastly, educators continue to agree that the habit of correctly spelling what one writes in and out of school is not the same as the ability to spell words dictated during the spelling period and that long time retention

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rather than immediate recall remains the overall goal of spelling instruction.(16,27)

Observers will be hard pressed to find evidence of one or any of these recommendations occurring in elementary classrooms today. A survey of 201 teacher time-distribution sheets in one city system indicated that the average amount of time scheduled for spelling instruction is 90 minutes with some going as high as 120 minutes. In order for this practice to truly qualify for the "more time on task" theory of learning, the task itself must have relevance; an expectation that is more delusion than reality.(3)

It appears that the United States is still the only country where spelling is taught as a separate subject and the test-teach method is the least method in evidence during this instructional tikme. Indeed, a special paper has been created to enable a pupil to take the weekly spelling test. The vertical nature of this paper reinforces the idea that the spelling of words is separated from written discourse and unrelated to the running dialogue of the creative story.

Even more contradictory is the use of cloze activities where the selection of the appropriate word reinforces word understanding not the spelling of the word. This practice masquerades under publishers' claims of using the phonics, rule-based approach to the teaching of spelling.

As to the practice of spelling words dictated by the teacher; information processing required for spelling is related to articulation and feedback information. When articulation and sound waves go separate ways, perception always goes with articulation.

The learner must have the opportunity to say the word and ultimately spell the word correctly from his own feedback processes.

The area of spelling relies heavily upon the textbook as the "sole resource of principle and practice" in teaching children."(18) Many educators are unaware of the dominance of the textbook in the American classroom. In fact, Europeans lable the textbook method the "American method." Horn, a major contributor to spelling research, attributes this dominance to the socio-educational philosophy which believes that a major goal of education is "that the pupil should develop the ability to study independently." Another group, not quite so kind, calls this textbook stranglehold the result of a "quest for a teacher-proof curriculum." Either viewpoint allows our colleagues, whose talents help create the spelling workbook, to hold with the hare and run with the hounds. As for the spelling workbook, any attempt to establish an instructional benefit from it is like trying to account for dried-apple pie.

In the textbook approach to spelling, the treatment of content rests upon a basic or "core" list of words. The fact that these word lists acutally improve the spelling ability of learners has not been established. If long time retention rather than immediate recall is the desirable goal in learning to spell then the curriculum writer should be concerned with the appropriateness of content as this factor facilitates learning and retention.

The study of word lists is a thriving branch of language research. Historically, early spelling textbooks were a vast assemblage of over 20,000 words. Authors were said to have engaged in

frantic efforts to uncover such exotic entries as "euhemerize" and "irrefragable." Such practices prompted one spychologist to like the period to "a search to the ends of the linguistic earth." (28) Between 1880 and 1930 the appearance of graded schools brought about the need for graded textbooks in all areas of the curriculum including spelling. There were said to have been 624 studies published during this period on the general topic of spelling lists and word selection.(13) By 1930 all major publishers had spelling programs on the market, some had more than one.

The second wave of word reform came as a result of attempts to provide a scientific-based curriculum. Ayres, Dolch, Gates, and Fitzgerald had each developed word lists using children's or adult's vocabularies. Two major studies appeared during the 1940's. The Rinsland Study, funded by the Work Progress Administration and published in 1945, was the first major graded word list. This work contained 15,652 different words taken from samples of children's writing. It was the work of Thorndike, however, that is generally credited with providing the first scientific basis for a spelling curriculum through information gathered and published in <u>The Teacher's Word Book of 30,000 Words.</u>

These major efforts altered the character of spelling books by reducing the number of words to be mastered, by guiding appropriate grade placement, and by attempting to provide a standard of progression, frequent to less frequent to less frequent. The Rinsland Study remains the most often mentioned resource in determining the basic word lists of the modern-day speller.

The leading investigators of word lists were clearly divided

into two contrastig groups. One group, working primarily prior to the 1930's, used the written discourse of adults and reflected the sociological viewpoint of curriculum - that of utility in life usage. The other group, led by psychologists such as Thorndike, selected from the written discourse of children.(4)

The furor over whether the adult's or the child's written vocabulary should provide the basis for a spelling curriculum was settled by Breed. His study called attention to the fact that there are 2,500 to 3,000 words that occur with a "fair degree of frequency in the writing of both groups."(2)

The most recent contributors to word lists have been the basal reader vocabulary studies. The writer of one published spelling program studied states that the transfer of learning from "reading to spelling and from spelling to reading is indeed great." (22) This theory is open to question. One study concluded that children are likely to learn how to spell only about 4% of the words they read.(30) A study by Townsend showed a higher correlation between spelling and vocabulary than between spelling and reading comprehension.(29)

What is the basis for word list selection among currently published spelling programs? Seven publishers cited the Rinsland List as a primary source. Five of these same publishers also cited the Harris and Jacobson List. Seven publishers failed to identify any specific source but did give reference to research studies on high frequency words. Two publishers cited their own in-house investigations. One series stated that it had consulted all seven major sources including an author's unpublished source. See Table 1.

Table 1

Basis for Word Selection

PUBLISHER	*1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Follett (1979)	x	x	x							
HarBrace (1974)	x		x	x			x		x	
Harper-Row (1975)	x	x	x	x				x		
Heath (1975)										
Houghton-Mifflin (1971)										
Laidlaw (1979)										
Lippincott (1973)										
Lyons and Carnahan (1974)										
McCormick-Mathers (1970)	x	x			x	x	x	x	x	
McGraw-Hill (1976)	x	x				x				
Merrill (1976)	x		x	x	x	x				
Sadlier-Oxford (1979)										
Scott-Foresman (1978)	x	x	x							
Silver-Burdett (1976)										
SRA (1971)					x		x			x
TOTAL	7	5	5	3	3	3	3	2	2	1

*1.	Rinsland, H.	Basic Vocabulary of Elem. School Children.	1945
2.	Harris-Jacobson	Basic Elementary Reading Vocabularies.	1972
3.	Carroll, John B.	American Heritage Word Frequency Book.	1971
4.	Kucera-Frances	Computational Analysis of Present English.	1967
5.	Fitzgerald, J.	Basic Life Vocabulary for Child and Adult.	1951
6.	Thorndike-Lorge	Teacher's Word Book of 30,000 Basic Words.	1921
7.	Gates, Arthur	A Reading Vocabulary for Primary Grades.	1935
8.	Dolch, E. W.	The 2,000 Commonest Words for Spelling.	1942
9.	Horn, Ernest	A Basic Writing Vocabulary.	1926
10.	Dale-Chall	A Formula for Predicting Readability.	1948

In general there appears to be a compromise on the question of whether pupil use or adult writing needs should determine the words to be taught in each grade. On the face of it, most authors claim to have considered reading and writing vocabularies of children to some degree.

Conversely, publishers are less specific concerning matters of where and at what level the selected words should be introduced. Those publishers who did comment indicated an emphasis on the introduction of the grapheme-phoneme pattern in the basal reading program. This would bring the words closer to reading rather than written usage, as though looking one way but rowing another. The reading process is quite different from that of spelling. Reading proceeds from the unknown to the known; spelling from the known to the unknown. The question to ask is at what point does spelling instruction become another event of reading instruction? Perhaps we have arrived at that point already.

An available storehouse of defunct spelling books along with a number of modern-day publications led to further exploration of the nature and characteristics of spelling word lists. A number of questions came to mind. What changes have occurred in the word load - total and grade level? Are today's publishers more in agreement as to which words to teach and at what level? To what extent has recent research influenced the word lists in terms of frequency of selection and mean grade placement? To what extent did the studies of writing vocabularies alter the character of publisher's word lists?

To answer these and other related questions the word lists of 248 spelling books from 32 publishers, grades one through eight, were placed into computer memore. Of these 248 spellers, 17 series were published between 1930 and 1940, and 15 are currently in print. Appendix A has a complete listing of the textbooks used indicating publisher, title, and year of publication.

A total of 8,645 different words from the 1940 programs and 10,853 different words in current usage were recorded.(6) Comparing the number of total different words it appears that the movement towards a reduction in the number of words included in any one spelling program reached its peak in 1940. The number of words a child will encounter in learning to spell in the elementary grades is increasing once again. See Table 2.

The mean and grade placement of the 111 high frequency words (those appearing in 15 or more seires) in both 1940 and 1980 listings was retrieved. Excluding months and days of the week, the grade placement has widened for roughly 54% of the words. Means have been raised for approximately 20% of the words. Looking at Table 3 we see, for example, that in 1940 the word "alone" had a grade placement range of grades two to three and a mean grade placement of grade three. In 1980 the grade placement range for this came word was from grades three to six, with a mean grade placement of grade four.

Insert Table 3 here

In measuring changes in the agreement of what words teach the rules of spelling best, authors appear less in agreement now

Table 2

Frequency of word occurrence in spelling books studied.

1980				1940			
Frequency	T	%	C%	C%	%	T	Frequency
1	4150	38.7	38.7	24.5	24.5	2125	1
2	1498	14.0	52.7	33.1	8.6	746	2
3	867	8.1	60.8	39.0	5.9	512	3
4	637	5.9	66.7	43.7	4.7	412	4
5	458	4.3	71.0	48.1	4.4	377	5
6	393	3.6	74.6	51.5	3.4	293	6
7	330	3.1	77.7	55.2	3.7	319	7
8	305	2.9	80.6	58.4	3.2	271	8
9	321	3.0	83.6	61.9	3.5	301	9
10	295	2.7	86.3	65.2	3.3	286	10
11	370	3.5	89.8	69.1	3.9	337	11
12	371	3.5	93.3	72.5	3.4	294	12
13	344	3.3	96.6	76.3	3.8	318	13
14	245	2.3	98.9	80.3	4.0	345	14
15	115	1.1	100.0	86.2	5.9	512	15
				93.7	7.5	652	16
				100.0	6.3	545	17
TOTAL	10,853					8,645	TOTAL

Table 3.

Some Examples of Changes in Word Entry Range and Mean Grade Placement 1940-1980.

WORD	Source*		1940		1980	
	G	HJ	GPR	M	GPR	M
alone	2	2	2-3	3	3-6	4
away	2	1	2-3	2	2-4	2
could	3	1	2-5	2	2-8	3
dust	3	3	2-5	3	2-6	6
nothing	3.9	1	2-4	3	3-6	4

*Gates-Spelling Difficulty
Harris-Jacobson Elementary Reading Vocabularies

than in the past. Evidence indicates that spelling programs from the 1940's reflect a steady increase in the number of different words to be learned beginning with grade 2. In 1980 programs such balance is not apparent with an unexplained drop in the number of words studied in the eighth grade.

Insert Table 4 here

Looking at Table 5 we see that 33% of the words used to teach spelling rules in current programs are high frequency that is, selected by five or more authors. This same relationship in earlier programs equals 55% of the total words studied. This would appear to indicate that at this period of time words were selected from a common source.

Insert Table 5 here

The criticism of repeated words cited by one study was also explored.(3) This practice was found to be excessive for two of the current publishers studied. There was no evidence of excessive use of repetitive words of the studied textbooks published prior to 1940.

A print-out was sought of the high-frequency words having a mean grade level common among five or more publishers of both 1940 and 1980 programs. The two lists were then compared. For example, there were 189 words with a placement level of grade two in 1980. All but nine of these words were similarly placed in 1940 programs.

Table 4

Total Different Words by Grade Level

GRADE	1980		1940	
	number	percent	number	percent
2	250	3.3	392	4.5
3	900	8.4	751	8.7
4	1,482	13.8	1,137	13.1
5	1,662	15.5	1,378	16.0
6	2,126	19.8	1,389	16.0
7	2,413	22.5	1,864	21.5
8	1,780	16.6	1,734	20.0
TOTAL	10,713	100.0	8,645	100.0

Table 5

Total Different Words Appearing in Five or More Series at the Same Grade Level

GRADE	1980		1940	
	Words	%	Words	%
2	232	6.6%	323	6.8
3	480	13.7	581	12.2
4	694	19.8	734	15.5
5	705	20.2	835	17.6
6	678	19.4	803	17.0
7	581	16.6	913	19.2
8	121	3.4	544	11.4
TOTAL	3,490*		4,733**	

*33% of total words. **55% of total words

The nine remaining words were placed at grade three in 1940. Table 6 lists the nine words and indicates the grade level according to the Gates Spelling Difficulty List and the Harris-Jacobson Reading Level List. The grade placement of the 1940 words was more closely related to spelling difficulty. Similar evidence appeared for subsequent word differences at other grades.

Insert Table 6 here

The number of plural forms taught has decreased by 1%. See Table 7. Differences in the selection of words to teach the derived form were not significant overall. Basically the changes were primarily in the number of different words and the total number of words having derived forms taught, that is, greater diversity across publishers and fewer forms taught in 1980 programs than in programs of 1940. Furthermore, 1980 publishers appear to concentrate the teaching of the derived form in one or two grades, usually sixth and seventh, as opposed to a steady increase of forms taught beginning at the fourth grade as was the practice in 1940 programs.

Insert Table 7 here

It appears that publishers are less in agreement as to which words should be selected to teach spelling and at what grade level would that learning best take place. Spelling difficulty did not

Table 6

Words With Mean Grade Placement Change From Grade 3 to Grade 2 and Their Ranking by Spelling Difficulty and Entry in the Basal Reader Vocabulary.

WORD	SPELLING DIFFICULTY GATES	READING HARRIS-JACOBSON
brown	3.9	first grade
children	4.1	first grade
farm	4.1	first grade
food	3.8	first grade
found	3.3	first grade
just	3.1	first grade
lot	3.6	second grade
train	3.3	second grade
why	2.8	first grade

Table 7

Number of Plural Form Words Taught by Grade Level
1940 and 1980

GRADE	s-es		y-ies		o-es		f-ves	
	1940	1980	1940	1980	1940	1980	1940	1980
2	-	-	-	-	2	-	-	-
3	1	1	4	-	2	1	-	-
4	2	2	4	15	1	-	3	1
5	-	1	4	5	1	2	3	3
6	-	-	7	1	-	-	-	-
7	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-
8	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sub Total	3	4	21	21	6	3	6	4

	1940	1980
TOTAL	36	32

appear to be a factor in the grade placement of the majority of words encountered in present-day spelling programs. The data consistently support the conclusion that the basis of inclusion of 54.7% of the words appears to be some justifiable criterion other than spelling difficulty.

High frequency words have decreased markedly for the eighth grade. Such wild abandon in the selection of words has resulted in an inordinate number of words that may be characterized as neither fish, fowl, nor good red herring. Our hopes for the discovery of a more scientifically based, scientifically balanced spelling curriculum dimmed as evidence continued to indicate that the spelling curriculum is less singular, less uniform than in the past.

Findings indicate a drift away from words selected on the basis of spelling regularity or irregularity in terms of written usage and toward selection, and even placement perhaps, on the basis of reading; thus creating spelling as an adjunct to the reading curriculum. Perhaps this is the most significant change of all. Certainly there should be some effort to trace the source of low frequency words that represent 60% of the total spelling content, for hidden within these words we may discover the real spelling curriculum and some reason for its existence after all.

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Appendix A

PUBLISHED SPELLING BOOKS PROVIDING WORD LISTS USED IN THIS STUDY GRADES ONE THROUGH EIGHT

American Book Co.	Buckley-White Activity Speller	1937
Follett & Co.	Spelling and Writing Patterns	1979
Hall & McCreary	Learning to Spell	1934
Harbrace, Jovanovich	Harbrace Spelling Program	1974
Harper-Row, Peterson	Pathways to Spelling	1975
Heath and Co.	The World of Spelling	1975
Houghton-Mifflin	Power to Spell	1971
	Newlon-Hanna Textbook/Notebook Speller	1937
Iroquois Pub. Co.	The Morrison Speller	1930
Laidlaw and Co.	Stanford Speller	1935
	The Language Arts Speller	1936
	Growth in Spelling	1979
Lippincott & Co.	Progress in Spelling	1935
	Basic Spelling	1973
Lyons & Carnahan	My Word Book	1974
	Word Book	1934
MacMillan & Co.	Work and Play With Words	1936
McCormick & Mathers	Skills in Spelling	1970
McGraw-Hill	Basic Goals in Spelling	1976
Charles Merrill	Spelling for Writing	1976
	Progressive Word Mastery	1938
Noble and Noble	The New Correct Spelling	1938
Rand McNally & Co.	My Own Speller	1934
Row-Peterson	The Modern Spelling Method	1934
Sadlier-Oxford	Spelling Skill	1979
Sanborn & Co.	The Individual Speller	1938
Scott Foresman	Spelling:Words and Skills	1978
Silver Burdett	Spell Correctly	1976
SRA	Words and Patterns	1971
Webster Publ Co.	Goals in Spelling	1937
Winston Book Co.	The Life-Use Speller	1936
World Book	Modern Life Speller	1936